

The Values That Shape U.S. Culture

Adapted from "The Values Americans Live By" by L. Robert Kohls

The list below contains beliefs that have been described as central to U.S. culture. Following each value, there is a brief explanation, and the resulting effect it has on day-to-day culture.

Note that these are not true for everyone, and may not be true of the culture that you observe in your time here in the U.S. As stated below in value number two, change is seen as good in the U.S. As such, some of the beliefs and values in this list may appear only in novels, or explain some of the behaviors that you see in your history books.

1. Personal Control over the Environment

People can/should control nature, their own environment and destiny; future is not left to fate.
Result: The U.S. is seen as an energetic, goal-oriented society.

2. Change/Mobility

Change is seen as positive and good, and indicates progress, improvement, and growth.
Result: The U.S. is a transient society, geographically, economically, and socially.

3. Time and Its Control

Time is valuable; the achievement of goals depends on productive use of time.
Result: Efficiency and progress can be emphasized often at the expense of interpersonal relationships.

4. Equality/Egalitarianism

People have equal opportunities; people are important as individuals, for who they are, not from which family they come.
Result: Relative to some other cultures, little deference is shown or status acknowledged.

5. Individualism, Independence, and Privacy

People are seen as separate individuals (not group members) with individual needs. People need time to be alone and to be themselves.
Result: U.S. Americans can be seen as self-centered and sometimes isolated and lonely.

6. Self-Help

U.S. Americans take pride in own accomplishments, not in name.
Result: Respect is given for achievements, not "accident of birth."

7. Competition and Free Enterprise

U.S. Americans believe competition brings out the best in people and free enterprise produces the most progress and success.
Result: There can be less emphasis on cooperation than competition.

8. Future Orientation/Optimism

U.S. Americans believe that, regardless of past or present, the future will be better, happier.

Result: Less value placed on past; "forward-looking"; constant looking ahead to tomorrow

9. Action and Work Orientation

U.S. Americans believe that work is morally right; that it is immoral to waste time.

Result: More emphasis on "doing" rather than "being"; pragmatic, no-nonsense attitude toward life.

10. Informality

U.S. Americans believe that formality is "un-American" and a show of arrogance and superiority.

Result: This leads to a much more casual and generally egalitarian attitude between people and in their relationships than in some other cultures.

11. Directness, Openness, Honesty

One can only trust people who "look you in the eye," and "tell it like it is." Truth is not dependent on circumstance: "honesty is the best policy."

Result: People tend to tell the "truth" and not worry about saving the other person's "face" or "honor."

12. Practicality/Efficiency

Practicality is usually the most important consideration when decisions are to be made.

Result: There is less emphasis on the subjective, aesthetic, and emotional elements or on consensual decisions.

13. Materialism/Acquisitiveness

Material goods are seen as the just rewards of hard work

Result: U.S. Americans can be seen as caring more for things than people or relationships.

SAYINGS THAT CONVEY U.S. VALUES

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), American essayist, poet

“It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Employers and business leaders need people who can think for themselves - who can take initiative and be the solution to problems. — Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*

Every human has four endowments - self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom... The power to choose, to respond, to change. — Stephen Covey

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin [mischievous creature] of little minds” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.” — Apple Inc.

“Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail.”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

“The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

“We are the creative force of our life, and through our own decisions rather than our conditions, if we carefully learn to do certain things, we can accomplish those goals.”
— Stephen Covey

“The key is taking responsibility and initiative, deciding what your life is about and prioritizing your life around the most important things.” — Stephen Covey

“I’m a greater believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more I have of it.”
— Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), principal author of the Declaration of Independence, 3rd U.S. President

“There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.”
— Beverly Sills (opera singer)

“The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are, first, hard work; second, stick-to-itiveness; third, common sense.”
— Thomas Edison

“The idea that the harder you work, the better you’re going to be is just garbage. The greatest improvement is made by the man or woman who works most intelligently.”
— Bill Bowerman, American track and field coach and co-founder of Nike, Inc.

“Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”— Steve Jobs

“Determine never to be idle. No person will have occasion to complain of the want of time, who never loses any. It is wonderful how much may be done, if we are always doing.”
— Thomas Jefferson

Do we need more time? Or do we need to be more disciplined with the time we have?
— Kerry Johnson (MBA, Ph.D. is an internationally known author and speaker)

The way to wealth, if you desire it...depends chiefly on two words, industry and frugality; i.e. waste neither time nor money, but make the best use of both. He that gets all he can honestly, and saves all he gets (necessary expenses excepted), will certainly become rich.
— Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

“Live out of your imagination, not your history.” — Steven Covey